

MOTHERWELL'S POEMS.*

What is poetry? A thousand times have we asked ourselves that question, and a thousand times have we heard better men than ourselves attempt a reply, but never, no never have we met an answer equal to the one we first read in Bacon in our boyhood. It is the most magnificent summary of the qualities of poetry that ever mortal penned. Critics have in vain attempted to surpass this glorious definition. We will give the philosopher's words in place of our own.

"Poesy is a part of learning, in measure for the most part restrained, but in all other points extremely licensed; and doth truly refer to the imagination; which, not being tied to the laws of matter, may at pleasure join that which Nature hath severed, and sever that which Nature hath joined. It is taken in two senses, in respect of words or matter: in the first sense it is but a character of style, and belongeth to acts of speech, and is not pertinent for the present; in the latter, it is, as hath been said, one of the principal portions of learning, and is nothing else but feigned history. *The use of this feigned history* hath been to give some shadows of satisfaction to the mind of man in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it, the world being in proportion inferior to the soul; by reason whereof there is, agreeable to the spirit of man, a more ample greatness, a more exact goodness, and a more absolute variety, than can be found in the nature of things. Therefore, because the acts or events of true history have not that magnitude which satisfieth the mind of man, poesy feigneth acts and events greater and more heroic; because true history propoundeth the successes and issues of actions not so agreeable to the merits of virtue and vice, therefore poesy feigns them more just in retribution, and more according to the revealed Providence; because true history representeth actions and events more ordinary and less interchanged, therefore poesy endueth them with more rareness, and more unexpected and alternative variations; so as it appeareth that, poesy serveth and conferreth to magnanimity, morality, and to delectation. And, therefore, it was ever thought to have some participation of divineness, because it doth raise and erect the mind, by submitting the show of things to the desires of the mind; whereas reason doth buckle and bow the mind unto the nature of things. And we see, that by these insinuations and congruities with man's nature and pleasure, joined also with the agreement and consort it hath had with music, it hath had access and estimation in rude times and barbarous regions, where other learning stood excluded."

* Poems narrative and lyrical, by William Motherwell. 1 vol. 18 mo.—pp. 220. Boston: William D. Ticknor, 1842.

Not one whit has Lord Bacon exaggerated in this sublime summary. How much meanness and baseness—how much care and sorrow—how much of the dull dreary monotony of life, has been shut out from men by the romance, the sweetness, the witchery of poesy! We would not live in a world like this if we were to be deprived of the smiles of the "loveliest of the nine!" As the song of a bird to a prisoner in a dungeon—as a dream of home to a way-worn old man by the road side—as the tongue of a countryman in a distant land, so is thy voice to us—oh! Poesy—amid the darkness and aridity of a care-worn life.

The poems before us are but little known in this country. We are surprised at this, for some of them are of high merit. One or two of them—"Jeanie Morrison," and "My heid is like to rend, Willie," for instance—have indeed appeared in the newspapers of this country, but the rest are almost as unknown, even to our professed critics, as the Talmud to a Black-foot Indian. This ignorance extends to the biography of the poet. Even the American editor of these poems, declares his inability to furnish more than a few slender facts respecting the events in the life of Motherwell. He tells us indeed that the poet was an editor in Glasgow—that he occasionally wrote for the periodicals of the day—that he was a devoted student of the old English poets—that in 1832 he published an edition of his poems—and that, three years later, at the early age of thirty-seven he died; but most of these facts we were already acquainted with, and those for which we are really indebted to the editor throw no new light on the character or genius of the poet. The productions of Motherwell must, therefore, explain themselves, nor can they draw aid from collateral circumstances. They can gain or lose nothing, as in the case of Byron, from their supposed revelations of the writer's secret history. No interest will attach to them, as to the poems of Burns, on account of the birth of the author. We cannot regard them, as we do the works of Hogg, with a wonder proportioned to the author's early ignorance and the lowly station he filled in life. Nothing of romance envelopes them like that which bathes the Arcadia of Sir Philip Sidney in undying glory. We cannot peruse them with an admiration heightened by the knowledge that the author like Milton, was blind. No mystery, no romance, no touching story has any connexion with these poems. They must stand or fall on their own merits.

The poems in this volume are of unequal power. Some of them display, as we have said, high merit; but others of them scarcely rise above mediocrity. They are divided into songs and poems—and these latter consist of occasional pieces, imitations of the old Norse poetry, and poems in the ancient ballad style. The Norse poems consist of "The Battle Flag of Sigurd"—"The wooing song of Jarl Egill Skallagrim"—"The

sword chant of Thorstein Raudi," and one or two others; and in these productions the author has caught the true spirit of the ancient Scandinavian minstrels. The wooing song of Jarl Egill Skallagrim is a rare specimen of a Scandinavian courtship. The story is simple. A Vikingir—brown, grim and bearded—has heard, far away in Jutland, of the charms of the daughter of an Orkney chieftain,—and as a Norseman suffers neither dangers nor distance to deter him from the pursuit of a bride, Jarl sets sail at once to see for himself this wondrous beauty. He comes with no protestations of humility, he feels he is in every way equal to her he woos, and in dwelling on her beauties he does not forget his own importance. This is truth itself. The wild bearded northmen of Scandinavia wooed their brides exactly as Jarl Egill woos the maiden of Orkney. He has left spoil and slaughter, he has left a distant shore, he says,

"To sing how I love thee,
To kiss thy small hand!
Fair daughter of Einar,
Golden-haired maid!
The lord of yon brown bark,
And lord of this blade;
The joy of the ocean,—
Of warfare and wind,
Hath bouned him to woo thee,
And thou must be kind.

There is a tone of confidence in this, unusual now-a-days to lovers. But Jarl Egill stops not here. He tells the maiden how highly she must consider herself honored by his suit.

"Ay, daughter of Einar,
Right tall mayest thou stand,
It is a Vikingir
Who kisses thy hand."

Nor is he less proud when he stoops to compliment her beauty; although many a sighing lover since has vainly attempted to equal the delicacy of the sea-king's flattery.

"Thy white arms are locked in
Broad bracelets of gold;
Thy girdle-steel's gleaming
With treasures untold:
The circlet that binds up
Thy long yellow hair,
Is starred thick with jewels,
That bright are and rare;
But gifts yet more princely
Jarl Egill bestows,
For girdle his great arm
Around thee he throws;

And again

"'Tis a Vikingir asks thee,
Land-maiden to wed!
He skills not to woo thee,
In trembling and fear—
* * * * *
He comes then as Jarl should,
Sword belted to side,
To win thee and wear thee
With glory and pride."

The maiden of Orkney has a spirit as high as that of her wooer. But this only increases his admiration, for as eagle mates with eagle, so the Vikingir would wed one like himself. He exclaims in exultation—

"The curl of that proud lip,
The flash of that eye,
The swell of that bosom,
So full and so high,
Like foam of sea-billow,
Thy white bosom shows,
Like flash of red levin
Thine eagle eye glows:
Ha! firmly and boldly,
So stately and free,
Thy foot treads this chamber,
As bark rides the sea:
This likes me—this likes me,
Stout maiden of mould,
Thou wooest to purpose;
Bold hearts love the bold."

And thereupon, as the story goes, Jarl caught the maiden in his arms, all enamored, and imprinting a score of kisses on her snow white forehead, bore her off in triumph to his ship. And when the maiden, affrighted at his impetuosity, turned pale and trembled, Jarl soothed her with tales of his prowess, holding her small white hand all the time in his brawny palm—just as Achilles would have held the hand of Briseis in his own, and told of his feats against the Trojans, looking into her soft blue eyes as he spoke. And then Jarl consoles her further by reminding her of the proud destiny which awaits her, telling her that she shall be loved and cherished even as the sword upon whose virtues he has been expatiating.

"Fair daughter of Einar,
Deem high of the fate
That makes thee, like this blade,
Proud Egill's loved mate."

The "Elfinland Wud," an imitation of the Ancient Scottish Romantic Ballad, displays no little merit; but the day has passed by for the extravagant popularity which hailed such effusions in the times of Chatterton, Bishop Percy and Scott. This is an age in which men read while they run, and poetry, however beautiful, which is locked up in obsolete words will find but few readers. Motherwell seems to have given way, however, to this antiquarian taste with true fervor. The finest specimen, perhaps, of his poems in this style—though it is scarcely after the ancient ballads after all—is the following "Cavalier's Song," which breathes, indeed, the very spirit of those noble gentlemen, who charged with the fiery Rupert at Marston Moor.

"A steed! a steed of matchlesse speed,
A sword of metal keene!
All else to noble heartes is drosse,
All else on earth is meane,
The neighinge of the war-horse prowde,
The rowlinge of the drum,
The clangor of the trumpet lowde,
Be soundes from heaven that come,

And O! the thundering presse of knights
 Whenas their war cryes swell,
 May tole from heaven an angel bright,
 And rouse a fiend from hell.

Then mounte! then mounte, brave gallants, all,
 And don your helmes amaine:
 Deathe's couriers, Fame and Honor, call
 Us to the field againe.
 No shrewish teares shall fill our eye
 When the sword-hilt's in our hand,—
 Heart whole we'll part, and no whit sighe
 For the fayrest of the land;
 Let piping swaine, and craven wight,
 Thus weape and puling crye,
 Our business is like men to fight,
 And hero-like to die!"

Verses like these would seem to imply that the poet had little sympathy for the gentler sex, and that he delighted rather in the neighing of the war-horse, and the sound of the trumpets afar off in battle, than in the music of the lute, the smiles of woman, or the low witching language of love. But we would form a wrong judgment if such should be our conclusion. That he was not insensible to the gentler passion, this volume bears many evidences. Let us give a few stanzas, breathing the most delicate imagery,—stanzas which he has quaintly styled "Certain pleasant verses to the lady of his heart." They are musical as the song of a lavrock, the singing of a woodland brook, or the harmony of unseen angels on the midnight air.

"The murmur of the merry brook,
 As gushingly and free
 It wimples with its sun-bright look,
 Far down yon sheltered lea,
 Humming to every drowsy flower
 A low, quaint lullaby,
 Speaks to my spirit, at this hour,
 Of Love and thee.

The music of the gay green wood,
 When every leaf and tree
 Is coaxed by winds of gentlest mood,
 To utter harmony;
 And the small birds that answer make
 To the wind's fitful glee,
 In me most blissful visions wake,
 Of Love and thee.

The rose perks up its blushing cheek,
 So soon as it can see
 Along the eastern hills, one streak
 Of the sun's majesty:
 Laden with dewy gems, it gleams
 A precious freight to me,
 For each pure drop thereon me seems
 A type of thee.

And when abroad in summer morn,
 I hear the blythe bold bee
 Winding aloft his tiny horn,
 (An errant knight perdy.)
 That winged hunter of rare sweets
 O'er many a far country,
 To me a lay of love repeats,
 Its subject—thee.

And when, in midnight hour, I note
 The stars so pensively,
 In their wild beauty, onward float
 Through heaven's own silent sea:

My heart is in their voyaging
 To realms where spirits be,
 But its mate, in such wandering,
 Is ever thee!

But O, the murmur of the brook,
 The music of the tree;
 The rose with its sweet shamefast look,
 The booming of the bee;
 The course of each bright voyager
 In heaven's unmeasured sea,
 Would not one heart-pulse of me stir,
 Loved I not thee!"

Not perfect, but yet beautiful. Had the poet amended one or two of the verses where the rhythm halts, these lines would have been ranked among the sweetest he ever wrote. Let us give another of his effusions on nearly the same theme. The poet calls it "the voice of love."

"When shadows o'er the landscape creep,
 And twinkling stars pale vigils keep;
 When flower-cups all with dew-drops gleam,
 And moonshine floweth like a stream;

Then is the hour
 That hearts which love no longer dream,—
 Then is the hour
 That the voice of love is a spell of power!

When shamefaced moonbeams kiss the lake,
 And amorous leaves sweet music wake;
 When slumber steals o'er every eye,
 And Dian's self chimes drowsily;

Then is the hour
 That hearts which love with rapture sigh,—
 Then is the hour
 That the voice of love is a spell of power!

When surly mastiffs stint their howl,
 And swathed in moonshine nods the owl;
 When cottage-hearths are glimmering low,
 And warden cocks forget to crow;

Then is the hour
 That hearts feel passion's overflow,—
 Then is the hour
 That the voice of love is a spell of power!

When stillly night seems earth's vast grave,
 Nor murmur comes from wood or wave;
 When land and sea, in wedlock bound
 By silence, sleep in bliss profound;

Then is the hour
 That hearts like living well-springs sound,—
 Then is the hour
 That the voice of love is a spell of power!"

And now for a "May morning Song."

"The grass is wet with shining dew,
 Their silver bells hang on each tree,
 While opening flower and bursting bud
 Breathe incense forth unceasingly;
 The mavis pipes in greenwood shaw,
 The throstle glads the spreading thorn,
 And cheerily the blythesome lark
 Salutes the rosy face of morn.

'T is early prime;
 And hark! hark! hark!
 His merry chime
 Chirrup the lark:
 Chirrup! chirrup! he heralds in
 The jolly sun with matin hymn.

Come, come, my love! and May-dews shake
 In pailfuls from each drooping bough;
 They'll give fresh lustre to the bloom,
 That breaks upon thy young cheek now.

O'er hill and dale, o'er waste and wood,
 Aurora's smiles are streaming free;
 With earth it seems brave holyday,
 In heaven it looks high jubilee.
 And it is right,
 For mark, love, mark!
 How bathed in light
 Chirrup the lark:
 Chirrup! Chirrup! he upward flies,
 Like holy thoughts to cloudless skies.

They lack all heart, who cannot feel
 The voice of heaven within them thrill,
 In summer morn, when mounting high
 This merry minstrel sings his fill.
 Now let us seek yon bosky dell,
 Where brightest wild-flowers choose to be,
 And where its clear stream murmurs on,
 Meet type of our love's purity;
 No witness there,
 And o'er us, hark!
 High in the air
 Chirrup the lark;
 Chirrup! Chirrup! away soars he,
 Bearing to heaven my vows to thee!"

There—that is delicious. It has a freshness about it as of the atmosphere after a summer shower, and breathes, moreover, through every verse a most bewitching melody. Why you can almost hear the lark, aye! even see his tiny form far up in the sunny ether.

But exquisitely as the poet has sung of love he has warbled not less sweetly on other themes. We would that we might quote a piece entitled "Midnight and Moonshine," but we can find space only for the first six verses; and we give them more for an incentive to buy the book and read the rest, than for aught else.

"All earth below, all heaven above,
 In this calm hour, are filled with love;
 All sights, all sounds have throbbing hearts,
 In which its blessed fountain starts,
 And gushes forth so fresh and free,
 Like a soul-thrilling melody."

These have been gladsome themes, but there are melancholy ones enow in the volume; and indeed the finest poems of our author are his pathetic ones. Little as we know of Motherwell, of one thing we are certain—he had seen suffering. No one can peruse his verses beginning "O, agony! keen agony," without feeling this. His stanzas, "What is glory? what is fame?" and the lines written a few days before his death breathe all the disconsolateness of a broken heart. But nowhere has the author displayed more real pathos than in his two poems, "Jeanie Morrison" and "My heid is like to rend, Willie"—poems which alone are sufficient to make Motherwell immortal. Often as they have been quoted in this country—and indeed they are nearly the sole poems by which he is known in the United States—we cannot resist the temptation of inserting at least one of them here. Let it be Jeanie Morrison. We give it without a word of comment, reading it in a holy silence to ourselves.

"I've wandered east, I've wandered west,
 Through mony a weary way;
 But never, never can forget
 The luv o' life's young day!

'The fire that's blawn on Beltane e'en,
 May weel be black gin Yule;
 But blacker fa' awaits the heart
 Where first fond luv grows cule.

O dear, dear Jeanie Morrison,
 The thochts o' bygone years
 Still fling their shadows ower my path,
 And blind my e'en, wi' tears:
 They blind my een wi' saut, saut tears,
 And sair and sick I pine,
 As memory idly summons up
 The blithe blinks o' langsyne.

'T was then we luvit ilk ither weel,
 'T was then we twa did part;
 Sweet time—sad time! twa bairns at scule,
 Twa bairns, and but ae heart!
 'T was then we sat on ae laigh bink,
 To leir ilk ither lear;
 And tones, and looks, and smiles were shed,
 Remembered evermair.

I wonder, Jeanie, after yet,
 When sitting on that bink,
 Cheek touchin' cheek, loof locked in loof,
 What our wee heads could think?
 When baith bent down ower ae braid page,
 Wi' ae buik on our knee,
 Thy lips were on thy lesson, but
 My lesson was in thee.

O, mind ye how we hung our heads,
 How cheeks brent red wi' shame,
 Whene'er the scule-weans laughin' said,
 We cleek'd thegither hame!
 And mind ye o' the Saturdays,
 (The scule then skail't at noon.)
 When we ran aff to speel the braces—
 The broomy braces o' June?

My head rins round and round about,
 My heart flows like a sea,
 As ane by ane the thochts rush back
 O' scule-time and o' thee.
 O, mornin' life! O, mornin' luv!
 O lightsome days and lang,
 When hinnied hopes around our hearts
 Like simmer blossoms sprang!

O, mind ye, luv, how aft we left
 The deavin' dinsome toun,
 To wander by the green burnside,
 And hear its waters croon?
 The simmer leaves hung ower our heads,
 The flowers burst round our feet,
 And in the gloamin' o' the wood,
 The throssil whuss lit sweet;

The throssil whuss lit in the wood,
 The burn sang to the trees,
 And we with Nature's heart in tune,
 Concerted harmonies;
 And on the knowe abune the burn,
 The hours thegither sat
 In the silentness o' joy, till baith
 Wi' very gladness grat.

Ay, ay, dear Jeanie Morrison,
 Tears twinkled down your cheek,
 Like dew-beads on a rose, yet nane
 Had ony power to speak!
 That was a time, a blessed time,
 When hearts were fresh and young,
 When freely gushed all feelings forth,
 Unsyllabled,—unsung!

I marvel, Jeanie Morrison,
 Gin I hae been to thee
 As closely twined wi' earliest thochts,
 As ye hae been to me!

O! tell me gin their music fills
Thine ear as it does mine;
O! say gin e'er your heart grows grit
Wi' dreamings o' langsyne?

I've wandered east, I've wandered west,
I've borne a weary lot;
But in my wanderings, far or near,
Ye never were forgot.
The fount that first burst frae this heart,
Still travels on its way;
And channels deeper as it rins,
The love o' life's young day.

O dear, dear Jeanie Morrison,
Since we were sindered young,
I've never seen your face, nor heard
The music o' your tongue;
But I could hug all wretchedness,
And happy could I die,
Did I but ken your heart still dreamed
O' bygone days and me!"

For "My heid is like to rend, Willie," we cannot find space—indeed we can scarcely read it for the tears that dim our eyes. But we may not resist quoting a few stanzas. How touchingly it begins,

"My heid is like to rend, Willie,
My heart is like to break.—
I'm wearin' aff my feet, Willie,
I'm dyin' for your sake!
O lay your cheek to mine, Willie,
Your hand on my breist-bane,—
O say ye'll think on me, Willie,
When I am deid and gane!"

And then;

"I'm sittin' on your knee, Willie,
For the last time in my life,—
A pair heart-broken thing, Willie,
A mither, yet nae wife.
Ay, press your hand upon my heart,
And press it mair and mair,—
Or it will burst the silken twine,
Sae strange is its despair!"

While even amid her lamentation that they ever met, she will not—all heart-broken though she is—reproach her lover.

"O! dinna mind my words, Willie,
I downa seek to blame,—
But O! it's hard to live, Willie,
And dree a warld's shame!
Het tears are hailin' ower your cheek,
And hailin' ower your chin;
Why weep ye sae for worthlessness,
For sorrow and for sin!"

And then, bidding him kiss once more her "white, white cheek," that once alas was red, she tells him in that lovely stanzas beginning "A stoun' gaes through my heid, Willie," that her days are numbered, and that even as she speaks her life-strings are parting, and that soon the golden bowl will be broken at the fountain. How mournfully she continues,

"The lav'rock in the lift, Willie,
That liltis far ower our heid,
Will sing the morn as merrilie
Abune the clay-cauld deid;

And this green turf we're sittin' on,
Wi' dew-drops shimmerin' sheen,
Will hap the heart that luvit thee
As warld has seldom seen.

But O! remember me, Willie,
On land where'er ye be,—
And O! think on the leal, leal heart,
That ne'er luvit ane but thee!
And O! think on the cauld, cauld mools,
That flic my yellow hair,—
That kiss the cheek, and kiss the chin,
Ye never sall kiss mair!"

There are numerous other poems in this volume, not equal indeed to the above, but still of considerable, we may say, of high merit. Who can read "Change sweepeth over all," "The Water," "Wearie's Well," "Mournfully!" "The bloom hath fled thy cheek, Mary," "The Parting," "Melancholye," and a dozen other of these poems without feeling that Motherwell was a poet of considerable power, gifted with pathos, nature, purity, and more than all, freshness—a poet, not indeed of the first class, nor always of equal merit, but one destined to be remembered among men long, long after the hand that writes and the eye that may read these pages, have mouldered into dust.

We thank God that the taste for genuine poetry is reviving in this land, and that the day has gone by when worldlings might sneer at the followers of the "sweetest of the nine," as madmen, or worse than that, as fools! Our booksellers' shelves no longer groan under unsold editions of American poems. Since the publication of Longfellow's "Voices of the Night," there has been a steady demand for poetry, and more than one edition of questionable stuff has been disposed of by taking advantage of this tide. New editions of standard poets are meanwhile appearing in the market, and meritorious authors are being dragged from obscurity and brought into deserved notice. This edition of Motherwell has been republished from the now scarce London one, and will be the means of making him generally known in this country. A volume of Tennyson has also appeared in Boston, and in London a neat and more complete edition of his poems will shortly be published under the author's own eye. Brainard has been rescued from the oblivion into which he was rapidly declining, and by the publication of his works, set on a pinnacle of light from which it will be impossible hereafter to dislodge him. Clark's poems are on the eve of publication; Sprague's have appeared within the last year; and Lowell is winning for himself laurels which, ten years ago, would have been unattainable even by him. A new era is breaking on us! The morning is reddening the east, the birds are already singing in the dewy wood, ere long the full splendor of the day will burst all gloriously upon us. Let us, like eastern magi, watch, one and all, for the first beams of the coming light. Let us, like Miriam, exult upon the timbrel.